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Abstract

This is a film review of *Winter's Bone* (2010).

Debra Granik's 2010 independent film *Winter's Bone* is the tale of seventeen-year-old Ree Dolly (Jennifer Lawrence), an Ozark woman warrior with the weight of a brutal ancient world on her shoulders. As her methamphetamine-cooking father, Jessup, is missing, Ree has left school and acts as primary caregiver to her catatonic mother and preadolescent siblings who depend upon her for survival. However, life becomes bleaker when Ree learns that Jessup used the family homestead to secure bail and subsequently disappeared. If Ree cannot produce her father—dead or alive—for an impending court date, the immediate family will be plunged into penury after losing their home and land. In her search for the truth about Jessup's disappearance, Ree boldly confronts the deep, intractable customs of her tribe by betraying the clan's code of silence and approaching hard-boiled, meth-cooking Dolly men unaccompanied—an act taboo and dangerous in the staunchly patriarchal tribe, one that garners her outsider treatment within her own clan.

Granik's adaptation of the Daniel Woodrell novel of the same name is undoubtedly a filmmaking feat, for she adroitly renders the mountain people of the southern Missouri Ozarks authentically and without caricature—a triumph few filmmakers approach, let alone achieve. Unfortunately, due to temporal restrictions and Granik's neo-realist approach, the film falls short of capturing fully the narrative's polymythic elements, for absent is the Dolly creation myth

and the numerous overt suggestions of rebirth and baptism found within Woodrell's novel, which smacks of Old Testament Christianity combined with an older, hazier mythology. However, through her masterful rendering of the novel's core—Ree's quest for truth and salvation for her family via self-sacrificial love—and her employment of ontological markers, narrative parallels, and cinematographic clues linking Ree to Christ, Granik presents the film as a Christ-figure narrative with Ree as the female savior who preaches her father's story and acts as a beacon of love in a brutal world informed by tribal law and custom. In so doing, Granik's neo-realism serves to confer sacred feminine power on Ree in a realistic context, one that challenges the typical female Christ figure as imagined in surreal science fiction films and television series.

The film's economically bleak landscape is achingly authentic: rusted antique cars, burned-out meth labs, and tarpaper shacks litter the post-apocalyptic-esque countryside, creating a fearsome biblical atmosphere that lingers between shocking reality and nightmare. Moreover, the film's musical score exclusively features raw, emotional melodies by folk musician Marideth Sisco, which overlay Ree's scenes with a sacred and nurturing air embodying her voluntary, perilous immersion into the meth underworld of the Ozark foothills for the sake of her vulnerable family: without a home, Blond Milton (William White) and Uncle Teardrop (John Hawkes) would vie for siblings Sonny and Ashley, respectively,

fates that would make them, in the words of Woodrell, “dead to wonder by age twelve, dulled to life, empty of kindness, boiling with mean”.¹

As the director suggests through frequent iteration of the patriarchs’ names, all Dolly men bear similar appellations—Milton, Arthur, Jessup—and are differentiated by sobriquets like “Blond,” “Little,” and “Thump.” As Woodrell implies in the novel, these names trace back to the founding fathers of the tribe, a christening structure similar to that of biblical tradition. (Even Uncle Teardrop, whose original name is not uttered in the film, carries the name Haslam—that of the tribe’s original prophet and deliverer.) These men, led by “big man” Thump Milton (Ronnie Hall), monitor the Dolly meth operation, passing violent judgment on those who betray tribal law by appealing to traditional law outside the holler. Despite Ree’s awareness of the danger in asking questions to facilitate her quest for Jessup, she disregards the risk and embarks on a trek through Dolly territory to prevent her family from becoming “dogs in the fields with Beelzebub scratchin’ out tunes”.²

Following with blind faith her suspicions about Jessup’s disappearance, Ree traverses the austere hinterland, speaking with family members to whom “blood don’t mean shit” when outside law and secrecy are concerned. As Granik agonizingly renders, Ree’s questions engender a near-fatal beating by Thump Milton’s wife Merab (Dale Dikey) and her two sisters, who infantilize Ree by

immobilizing her body, knocking out one of her teeth, and blacking her left eye to the point of partial blindness. For several moments of the film, the audience thinks that Merab and her sisters have murdered Ree in Thump's garage. Ultimately, however, the scene shifts to Ree lying injured but alive in the fetal position in the hostile "manger" of the garage. Here, Granik portrays Ree as one crucified by her people for "preaching" her father's story, waking bleary-eyed and bloody-faced and -handed under fluorescent lamps whilst surrounded by looming Dolly men and women; however, Ree is saved and reborn through the sacrificial love of her fractious, meth-addicted Uncle Teardrop, who adopts her past and future transgressions against the clan ("She's now yours to answer for") in order to save her from certain death, carrying her from the garage in Pieta-fashion. Thus, although Ree does not give her physical life for her family, in many respects she has died in her old life and been reborn to a new one in which she is alienated from the clan.

Once Teardrop returns Ree home, Granik maintains her portrayal of Ree as Christ reborn, for Ree's friend Gail (Lauren Sweetser) cleanses her bleeding wounds with a damp cloth, cradling her as she tenderly caresses her torn, bruised flesh in a touching baptismal tableau. In addition, after a period of convalescence, Ree visits the local ROTC officer to whom she expresses an interest in joining the army and her need to receive the forty thousand dollar enlistment bonus as soon

as possible. However, upon learning that she must wait to receive the money and that she cannot bring her siblings and mother to base, Ree sacrifices her dreams of serving in the army in order to keep her family together, whether they have a home or not.

Soon after returning home, Merab and her sisters visit Ree, demanding she leave her gun behind and follow them blindfolded to the resting place of Jessup's bones. Again risking her life for her family's livelihood, Ree follows as the Magi-like women transport her to the swamp in which the clan dumped Jessup's body after murdering him for "snitching." Merab subsequently saws off Jessup's hands as proof of his death and inability to appear in court, causing flecks of meat and bone to spatter Ree's face, an action literally and metaphorically mimicking the sprinkling of holy water during baptism, for Jessup's hands confer a blessing on Ree and the family, delivering them from eviction and bestowing the unclaimed bond money on Ree. As the final scene pans out with Ree assuring Sonny and Ashley that she will never abandon them, the song "Farther Along" begins, with Marideth Sisco crooning, "Tempted and tried we're oft made to wonder / Why it should be thus all the day long / While there are others living about us / Never molested though in the wrong," which evokes the memory of Ree's temptation to leave her family and the criminal Dollys for the army, an act Granik portrays as being beyond the capacities of selfless Ree.

Winter's Bone is a film celebrating the power of love, sacrifice, and resurrection through the selfless actions of audacious heroine Ree Dolly, qualities that make analyzing the film through a feminist Christological lens legitimate. While Ree is in no way the first female Christ figure in film—Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987) and Tim Robbins' *Dead Man Walking* (1995), among others, exhibit the female-savior trope—*Winter's Bone* still offers new and refreshing ideas about the possibility of female activity and authority and reflects changing American theological beliefs and tropes as the film garnered independent and mainstream approval, winning the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival and earning four Academy Award nominations. Moreover, Granik's film highlights the equality of women and men before God as it reinterprets the biblical Christ narrative through a teenage girl from a hardscrabble area of the Ozarks whose family comprises meth-cooking, criminal men and women who make their own law and way in the world, one which Ree boldly confronts and rebukes in order to preserve the integrity of her immediate family.

¹ Woodrell, Daniel. *Winter's Bone*. 2006. New York: Bay Back, 2010. Print. p. 8.

² Woodrell, Daniel. *Winter's Bone*. 2006. New York: Bay Back, 2010. Print. p. 15.